CAUSES AND CONTROL OF RIOT AND PANIC

By HADLEY CANTRIL

EUROPE has, for five years, been living under tremendous strain. Frustration and insecurity have been widespread. Before occupation there is still to come the terrific impact of invasion with all its dislocations. Conditions will be ripe for panic. In the pages which follow, the author discusses the bases and prevention of riot and panic.

In connection with this subject, Dr. Cantril will be best remembered as the author of *Invasion from Mars*, a brilliant analysis of the panic touched off by the famous Orson Welles broadcast of the same name. A well-known social psychologist, he is Director of Princeton University's Office of Public Opinion Research.

PERIODS OF RAPID SOCIAL TRANSITION are generally characterized by sporadic outbursts of some sections of the population which must be controlled as soon as possible in the interest of general order, community welfare, or the maintenance of the prestige of the governing authority. The Allied Military Governments will be face-to-face with populations that have experienced instability on the political and economic as well as the military fronts. These people may well have become confused by changing or rival authorities; they will certainly have lived through exhausting months or years of torment, worry, and emotional strain. They may even, during the early days of military occupation, feel bitter disappointment and intense shock when they find that the hopes and dreams they thought would be immediately fulfilled when the oppressor was finally ousted are not suddenly realized under the Allied military command.

All of this background adds up to chaos or near chaos in the psychological world of many people in occupied territories. It will be surprising if riots are not started by those who want to achieve specific goals quickly, or if panics do not follow in the wake of the confusion and bewilderment of suffering people.

It is therefore imperative that the personnel of the Allied Military Governments should try to understand and be sympathetic with the causes of such outbursts. For if these are dealt with ruthlessly and solely in line with an old-fashioned military tradition, the populace may find it more difficult than otherwise to distinguish between what they have

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expected to be democratic occupation as contrasted to the authoritarian occupation our side has deposed.

We shall consider here two forms of mass behavior that are particularly inimical to the stability and disciplined control of a social group: riots and panics. Our approach will be the psychological one, an approach that must become part and parcel of modern military science. It is, of course, *not* our contention that the psychological approach should entirely supplant strictly military methods of handling riots and panics. But it *is* our contention that if a psychological approach is properly understood and adroitly carried out, the need for military measures will be considerably minimized.*

RIOTS

Causes.

The beginning of a mob riot is almost always the formation of a group of people into a crowd. The crowd becomes transformed into a mob when the members decide on a particular course of action which they think will achieve a specific goal. Mobs are, of course, regarded as "undesirable" by the ruling class in society. It should be remembered, however, that the small groups of people who spearheaded revolutions, including our own American Revolution, were regarded as mobsters by the members of the society which the revolutionaries overthrew. This point is of more than passing academic interest, for it shows how deeply rooted in some instances the grievances of mob members may be.

Individuals who constitute a mob always have certain common interests and common needs. Their need may be of a physical variety, such as a need for food or shelter, or it may be of a psychological nature, such as the need for a recognition of status, a feeling of superiority, or a desire for vengeance. Whatever the common source of motivation may be, it is one which has been generated in the community or society because somewhere along the line that community or that society has not provided adequately for the normal satisfaction of this need. To regard mob members as "crackpots," "bad eggs," or "the dregs and undesirables of society" is a false and too easy explanation. This does not mean that we must indulge in any soft sentimentality in our understanding or treat-

* A discussion of the military measures and techniques most useful in quelling riots will be found in *Riot Control* by Colonel Sterling A. Wood, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1942. It is obviously essential that the military personnel which might be called on to handle riots and panics if they are otherwise likely to get out of hand must be properly trained, adequately equipped, and led by alert commanding officers.

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ment of mob members. But it does mean that if we are to discover why riots start and how they can be prevented, we must go beyond glib generalizations.

Naturally, the greater the similarity of interests and needs on the part of potential mob members and the greater the intensity of their desires, the more rapidly will a crowd turn into a mob which plunges headlong toward the accomplishment of its objective. In occupied territories, certain common grievances or frustrations may be slumbering but may suddenly be wakened when the rigid discipline imposed by Nazi-Fascist domination has been removed. Or common grievances or frustrations may arise after Allied Military Governments take over.

Obviously not all people with common troubles accept the mob solution of their difficulties. People who become members of mobs are further characterized by the fact that they are not aware of, or not convinced of, the really basic causes of the problems they are facing. In other words, they are more likely than not to be people who have relatively little understanding of what it's all about—unless, of course, they are members of a sophisticated revolutionary mob with a basic long-range program.

And because mob members are filled with some grievance or other and because they are less likely to know what it's all about, they are in greater need than most people for some solution, some interpretation of their problems which they can understand. For example, members of lynching mobs generally come from the poorest groups in the community. They are suffering real economic hardship and, in addition to that, cannot fathom the basic economic complexities that keep their standard of living down. In their search for some explanation of their difficulties, these people readily pounce on the possibility that getting rid of a certain Negro or that keeping the "nigger" in his place will improve their own lot. It is a significant fact that the number of lynchings increases when the price of cotton goes down.

The two basic characteristics of mob members are, then,

1. Common needs, either physical or psychological, which are intensely felt; and
2. A strong desire for some meaning or explanation of the difficulty they feel they are in.

With the psychological stage set in this fashion, a mob is finally

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brought into being when some leader arises. The leader is a person who, quickly sensing the difficulties of those around him, expresses *their* troubles. He can identify himself with each person and, in turn, each person identifies himself with the leader. The leader cements his position of leadership by providing his puzzled and frustrated followers with some simple, easily comprehensible and generally superficial explanation of their difficulties. If he is particularly clever, he coins or picks up slogans and symbols or appropriate cliches. And his explanation includes, of course, some positive suggestion for action, the very thought of which begins to release the pent-up aggression of the mob members.

At this point, with the mob members absorbed in pushing ahead with action, the standards of morality, ethics, and behavior regarded as right and proper in the outside world rapidly fade into the background. In their place come new standards for action—standards which are judged good if they will help achieve the mob's goal and bad if they impede such achievement. In this new little psychological world, the mob member begins to have a feeling of self-righteousness, he loses his old sense of individual responsibility, acquiring instead a sense of participation, of belonging, and of self-importance as he moves with and helps the others around him overcome the obstacles in the common road ahead.

The mob acts, then, as a close unit, spurred on by its own sense of justice, and regarding those who try to thwart it as enemies to be overcome.

How to prevent riots.

Every mob riot will be the result of a particular set of conditions more or less peculiar to itself. Nevertheless, the fundamental causes of mob outbursts outlined above point clearly to certain measures that can be taken to keep riot-producing conditions from coming to a head. Which one or which combination of these measures is relevant will be up to the personnel on the ground to determine.

1. *Keep yourself regularly and accurately informed* of what people in all sections of the public are thinking. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Try to uncover in some systematic and periodic fashion the major worries, interests, anxieties, hopes, and fears of all types of people. This can be done in many ways—by some polling mechanism adapted to the situation, by skillful interviewing, by overhearing conversations,

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by analyzing mail or the press, by keeping track of rumors, etc. Watch particularly for any cleavages of opinion, any piling up of complaint in any segment or area of the population.

2. Wherever possible *do all you can to satisfy the needs of the public.* And remember that these needs are psychological as well as physical. Stop grievances and frustrations before they accumulate. If it seems wise and expedient and if it is possible, do not hesitate to adjust rules and regulations or to shift emphases in order to adjust to new demands. But do not, of course, compromise your own interests or goals in the process.

Try to put into effect as soon as possible a carefully designed educational program which will establish in the minds of the majority of people that particular set of values which will provide in the long run the best framework within which to establish or to reestablish a smoothly operating government consistent with United Nations' principles.

3. *When dissatisfaction is discovered in some section of the public, carry on a specific and highly directed informational campaign* to show the people concerned the basic causes of their dissatisfaction, what is being done to remedy them, why no more or nothing at all can be done at the moment.

Think ahead of time of what over-simple solutions for complex subjects may be likely to catch hold. Show how these solutions are not solutions at all and demonstrate that to follow them out is to pursue a will-o'-the-wisp.

4. *Provide ways in which people of all classes, ages, or racial background can participate in accepted and desirable social behavior.* Try to give everyone some sense of social status, some feeling that he personally belongs to and is important as a member of an accepted social group. Teach and encourage the mechanism of democratic choice and solutions to problems. So far as possible encourage group decisions as contrasted to orders from above.

5. *Prevent the allegiance of any large number of people to potentially troublesome leaders.* Find out who these leaders might be. Try to dissolve the leader-follower relationship by showing followers and potential followers that it is against their own self-interest to follow this leader's solution and recommendations. Meet their problem but not their solution. Help them save face. Use surveillance and arrest where necessary—but in doing so watch out that you do not make a martyr of any leader you put in jail. In so far as possible discredit him ahead of time.

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6. *Don't allow any important or significant section of the population to focus on any common enemy or any common grievance.*

7. *Don't let crowds get out of hand.* If danger signs appear in crowd formations, keep the crowd moving, order dispersal, clear up or remove when you can the cause of the crowd existence.

8. *In extreme cases of group tensions, enforce strict discipline and exert iron control.* But remember that this is no ultimate solution of the problem, that it is, indeed, the commonly practiced method of the Nazis in the territories they occupy today.

How to control riots once they have started.

The following suggestions for the control of riots are all psychological suggestions—to be tried wherever possible before the use of strong-arm methods. Again, one or several of them may be applicable in a specific situation.

1. *Learn all you can ahead of time* about the mob you will have to deal with. If a riot is reported, try to find out the circumstances that caused it, who its leader is, what its objective is. Plan your own strategy accordingly.

2. *Capitalize on surprise.* Most mob members know they are working against time. Show them that they have underestimated your knowledge and efficiency.

3. *Act swiftly at all times.* Mobs are encouraged by any early successes they have. Make and execute your decisions promptly.

4. *Act surely, without hesitation.* Make clear that you are completely on top of the situation. Don't allow any possibility of doubt on this point.

5. *Show discipline, self-control, and coordinated action.* All of these characteristics are usually absent in mobs. But they are highly respected and their demonstration is impressive to mob members.

6. *Never bully a mob.* A clever mob leader will rapidly sense any bluff on your part. Be able to deliver at all times. Demonstrate that you always have another card up your sleeve.

7. *Pay no attention to verbal thrusts; don't get into arguments.* Even if you do have a glib tongue, you already have two strikes against you if you try to argue with a mob.

8. *Distract the mob's attention.* Try to divert them.

9. *Capitalize on respected authority.* One of the most successful ways of dissolving mobs peacefully is to bring in some leading citizen, some

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individual known to have the self-interest of the mob members at heart or known to have sufficient authority, determination, and integrity to carry out punishment for mob members who break the law. Get attention fixed on the presence of such an individual, have him talk to the mob, win their sympathy, and urge dispersal.

a. Once the mob's attention is turned to a respected outsider, one line he can take is to *demonstrate to the mob members that their objective is impossible of attainment*, that it is futile for them to continue and only trouble lies ahead for them.

b. A second useful approach for such an individual to take once he has the mob's attention, is to *meet their point of view*. He can sympathize with them, demonstrating his sympathy by rehearsing for the mob its own grievances and by carefully leading them on to accept some other solution than mob behavior as a satisfaction for these grievances. He can say, "Sure you're right, but you're going about things the wrong way."

10. *Try to separate spectators on the fringes of the mob from the actual mob members*; thus the mob will be kept to a minimum number by making it physically difficult for spectators to get caught up in its emotional vortex.

11. *If the mob or any of its members offers physical resistance which has or may have serious consequences, then act quickly* and show at once who is boss.

PANICS

Causes of panics.

Two general sets of conditions cause panics:

1. A panic occurs when people are together in a group and when no way appears of avoiding an apparent catastrophe. This is the more usual conception of panics—those resulting from fires in theatres, sinking ships, etc. The prevention of the conditions leading to panics of this sort is, of course, not primarily a psychological problem.

2. Other panics, by no means localized to people who are physically together as a group, occur among persons who for one reason or another are particularly susceptible to some suggestion when face-to-face with a situation that seems critical. Panics generated by shocking news, false rumors, terror propaganda are of this variety. The present discussion of the cause of panics is concerned with this type—panics resulting from a peculiar and often avoidable set of psychological conditions.

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Many influences are likely to make people susceptible to suggestion. Feelings of insecurity and instability accompany a change from an old to a newly forming political world; ignorance often leads to the uncritical acceptance of an idea. When people have intense worries, when they lack self-confidence or self-discipline, they are unusually susceptible to suggestion. And Allied Governments may find fear playing an especially large role in certain backward areas; there the population will be seeing for the first time modern ways of doing things which, because they are not understood, may prove awesome and frightening.

The result of such susceptibility in any section of the population is that any apparently realistic threat which cannot be prevented or from which no escape seems possible is likely to create a panic. The threat may actually be serious and consequential, such as a rapid inflation or an approaching enemy; or from the point of view of the outsider it may be absurd and silly, such as a story that the Martians are invading us, or a false rumor of the effectiveness of some secret weapon. In either case the individual experiences a definite threat to himself or to something that he regards as a part of himself—his family, his property, or his reputation. If disaster is to be avoided, the situation calls for immediate action. But the individual cannot figure out any directed action which will successfully avoid catastrophe. His behavior, lacking rational direction, is characterized as panicky.

Let's suppose for a moment that a panic is being caused by an implicit belief in some "news" which has, however, no basis in fact. Why do people go into a panic? Why do they not act sensibly, check the news to see whether or not it is true?

In the first place, the "news" may so closely fit into some pattern of beliefs or attitudes already held that the suggestion seems reasonable enough; it may, indeed, fulfil some expectation already held. In such instances it never occurs to an individual that a check is necessary. For example, if a population has experienced torture and brutality at the hands of one invading army, it would not be surprising if rumors describing the torture of another invading army—even though the second is fighting against all the characteristics of the first one—were taken seriously.

False suggestions may also be accepted if people are baffled by a situation, if they are desperately seeking some interpretation or solution,

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but are completely unable to find one. A person may try to act rationally but may be unable to do so.

There are important variations of this last set of conditions where people are puzzled and do not know what to do. Some individuals may simply lack any standards against which to check the situation threatening them; as a matter of fact, it may never occur to them that they should check to see if the situation really is as they have been told it is. On the other hand, other people may try to check up, but their checking may itself be false or they may check with other people who already have accepted the suggestion leading to panic. For example, a person may hear on his radio that the enemy is at the city's gates. He then looks out the window to see if anything unusual is happening outside. Seeing a crowd of people going down the street, he jumps to the conclusion that everyone is getting away. But the fact may be that the radio report was only part of some radio drama, and the crowd of people in the street may only be going to a baseball game. In still other instances, people may try to check but may be unable to do so because no reliable standards are available to make a valid check possible. For example, a crowd of people awaiting the arrival of friends and relatives on a ship may be thrown into a panic by a rumor that the ship has just gone down outside the port. Cool-headed members of the group may unsuccessfully try to check the rumor with officials who themselves may not yet know the true situation. The naturally cool-headed individual may himself become panicky.

So this futile, irrational, panicky type of behavior may be started either (1) because a false explanation is readily accepted or (2) because no solution to the situation is seen, no sensible, plausible direction is given.

Prevention of panics.

Every panic, like every riot, has its own peculiar causes. But some of the following suggestions should serve as prophylactics against panics.

1. *Do everything possible to keep down anxieties and to provide security* for all sections of the population. In the simpler cases where panics might be caused by accidents or physical catastrophes, follow every caution of the authorities in practising safety first and discipline.

A basic rule for minimizing anxiety is to give people a routine. Once tasks, habits, and expectancies have been set, do not make any more

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changes than are absolutely necessary. The possible anxiety that may be caused in a population by a shift in the way of doing things should itself be an important consideration in the decision as to whether or not that change is practicable. If change is decided upon, give plausible reasons for it. Don't let anyone get the impression that you don't know what you're doing, that you're whimsical.

2. *Teach obedience to orders.* Create a respect for discipline and an ability to follow it.

3. *Keep people fully informed* on all subjects around which panics might start. Back up your informational output with demonstrable, plausible facts and events.

4. *Keep in constant and close touch with the people* to discover on what points they want and need information. Do not allow any prolonged bewilderment or perplexity to bother any section of the people.

5. *Control rumors.* Watch out for rumors, note their frequency and nature; if they seem at all serious or unusual, scotch them quickly with authoritative and widely publicized answers.

6. *In severe cases use severe treatment to avoid panics.* Threaten punishment or enforce strict discipline—but remember this is a last resort and not a permanent solution.

Control of panics once they get started.

1. *Remove the cause of the panic if that is possible.*

2. *Try to divert attention.* It may be necessary to work out quickly some dramatic way to get attention, since people will be absorbed with their own problems.

3. *Once attention is diverted, provide information quickly.* Tell people "I have just received word that . . . . . ." Repeat your information over and over again in as many ways as possible. Keep your information simple, direct. If people are not physically together and if the message must reach scattered individuals, use radio, telegraph, press, messengers, everything. Have your information come from authoritative, well-established sources whose integrity is beyond question.

4. *Humor or singing may sometimes be used as diversions.* They can occasionally snap people back to objectivity, give them insight, cooperation. But in such cases you must be sure of the appropriateness of these devices. They are most likely to be successful if a panic has occurred in

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a fairly homogeneous group where the same thing will appear funny to people or the same song will catch hold.

5. *Once a panic has completed its course, start at once to remove both its immediate and basic causes.*

The suggestions outlined here to prevent riots and panics may require basic reformations and overhaulings of communities. Such fundamental changes cannot be undertaken too rapidly without breeding more of the very psychological insecurity they are designed to destroy. Patience is required. If reform is to be accompanied with majority approval and applause, people must be convinced of its desirability. But at least AMG may help to lay down the structure upon which the people can build for themselves societies which will satisfy in some durable way their needs, aspirations, and understanding.

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